

## **Historic, Archive Document**

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F O R T U N E S    W A S H E D    A W A Y

"BURLEY TOBACCO"

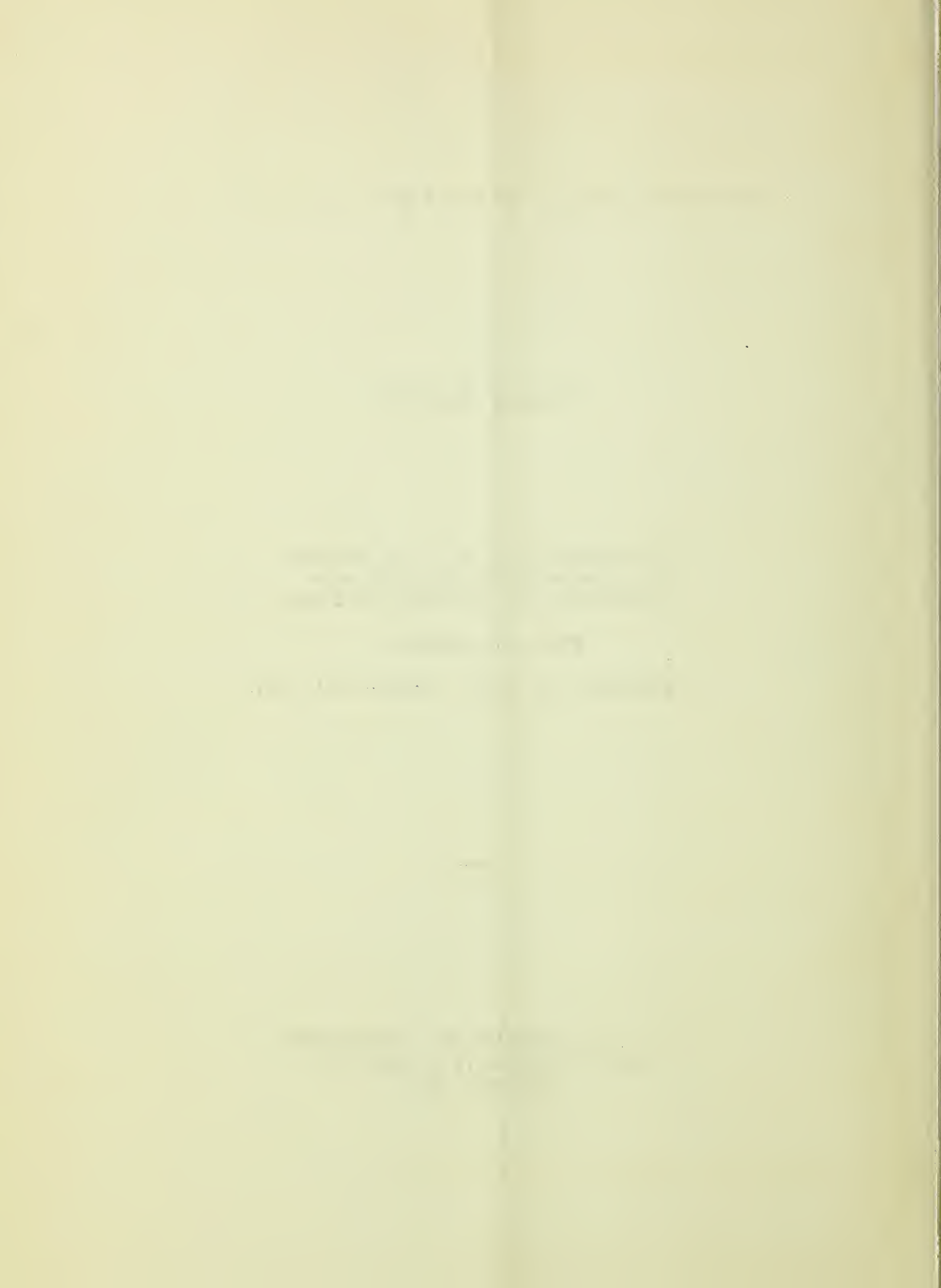
Broadcast No. 44 in a series  
of discussions of soil con-  
servation in the Ohio Valley.

WLW, Cincinnati

February 25, 1939 6:45-7:00 p.m.

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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE  
Dayton, Ohio



SOUND: Thunder, followed by rain...

ALLISON

Fortunes Washed Away!

ORGAN: I GET THE BLUES WHEN IT RAINS.

ALLISON

Glamour surrounds the history of tobacco, and many are the anecdotes told about its early uses. Legend has it that Sir Walter Raleigh's manservant doused his master with water, thinking him on fire. But it was not Sir Walter Raleigh who introduced the tobacco plant to Europe. It was brought there by Francisco Fernandes, who had been sent by Philip of Spain to investigate the products of Mexico. And the word nicotine came from Jean Nicot, French Ambassador to Portugal, who sent seeds of the plant to Queen Catherine d'Medici. At first, almost miraculous healing powers were attributed to the plant. "Divine tobacco," it was called by Spenser; "Our holy herb Nicotian," by William Lilly. But today, in Bourbon County, Kentucky, it's called plain old burley, for Kentucky leads the nation in burley tobacco production, and Bourbon County leads Kentucky.

ORGAN: SMOKE DREAMS.

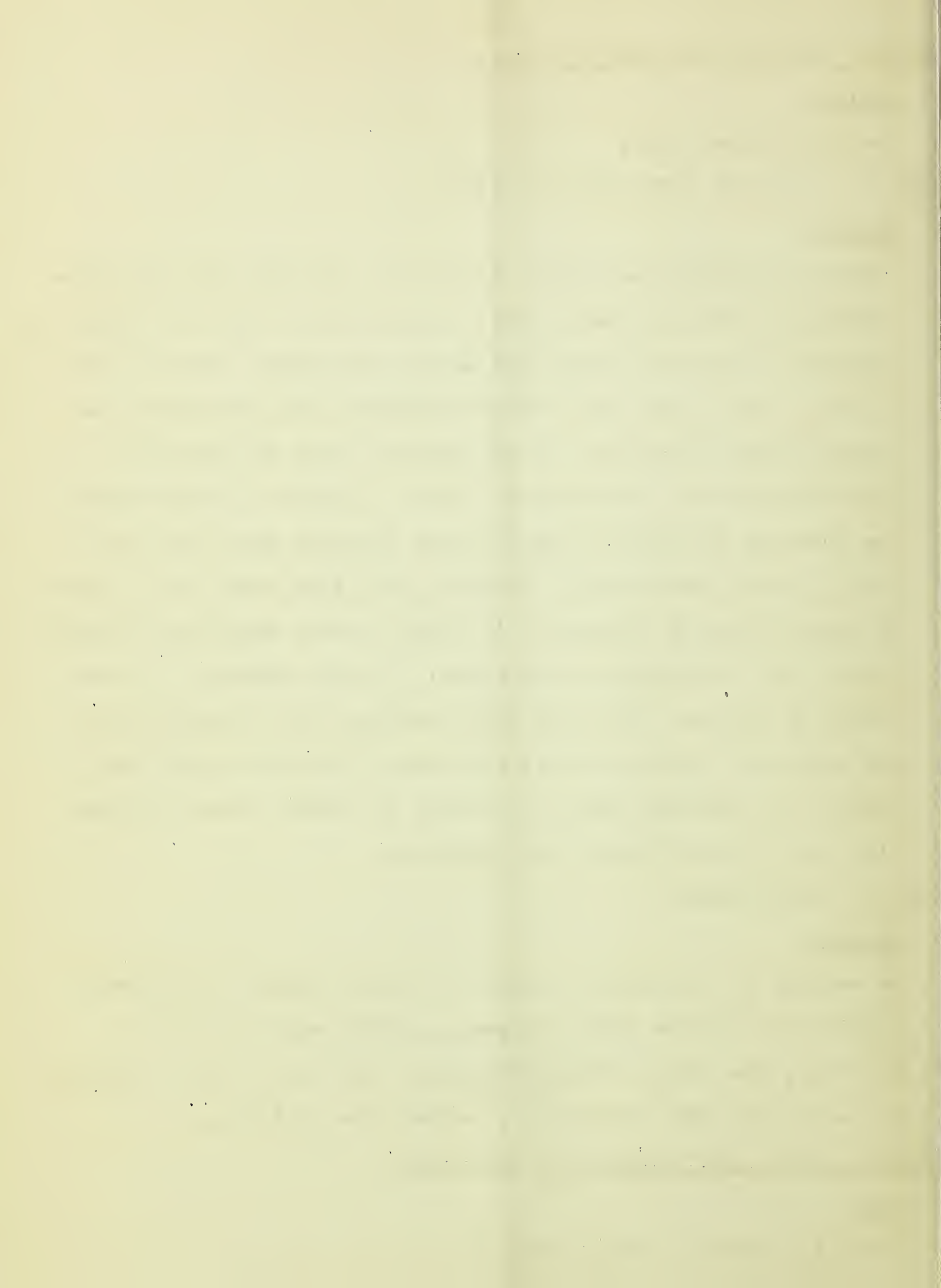
ALLISON

An average of ten million pounds of burley tobacco is produced annually by Bourbon County farmers, growers such as John V. Woodford, Hume Payne, Wesley Florence. And one of these farmers is J. M. Leer, who moved to a run-down farm in 1924...

SOUND: Screen door swings open and slams.

LEER

Where you want this box, George?



GEORGE

Oh, just put it down anywhere, Roe. It'll take some time to get straightened around.

SOUND: Box placed on floor.

LEER

Don't tell me moving's not a job. I sure hope this is the last time we'll ever have to do it.

GEORGE

Well, from the looks of this farm we won't be here very long. We might just as well have stayed in Nicholas County.

LEER

Oh, you know me, George. I'm just a Bourbon County farmer, born and bred. We're one of the oldest families in the county, too--sixth generation of Leers.

GEORGE (good naturedly)

I oughta know. Your sister Corday, all she does is look up pedigrees.

LEER (laughing)

Hope she doesn't run on to any horse thieves.

GEORGE

All I can say is, you've gone up to your neck in debt to buy this farm. If you don't make it pay, I don't know what we'll do.

LEER

I'll admit, it's just about as poor a looking prospect as you ever saw. Gullied, no cover on it, except that darned old sage grass. But it's naturally good land.

GEORGE

And you've gotta have good land if you grow burley.







LEER

I don't know if we'll grow much tobacco at first or not. The first thing we gotta do is to lime the ground, and put phosphate on it. Guess I'll sow most of it in rye and grasses this year to put it back.

GEORGE

Well, it sure is a sight.

LEER

Yeah, Billy Miller's owned it for a long time, and he's always rented it out. The tenants have done what they wanted to, and they've just about corned the land to death. Even check-rowed the corn. That side hill over yonder is pretty steep, and if you hit on that kind of ground you haven't got no business checking it.

ORGAN: SMOKE DREAMS.

ALLISON

Sound philosophy of land stewardship: If the land is steep, don't check the corn. For corn is a clean-tilled crop, and cotton is a clean-tilled crop, and tobacco, regardless of quality, is a clean-tilled crop. And Roe Leer, on a worn-out farm, fought with his back to the wall, fought to build up the soil...

SOUND: Chant of tobacco auctioneer in distance, thru following...

HY

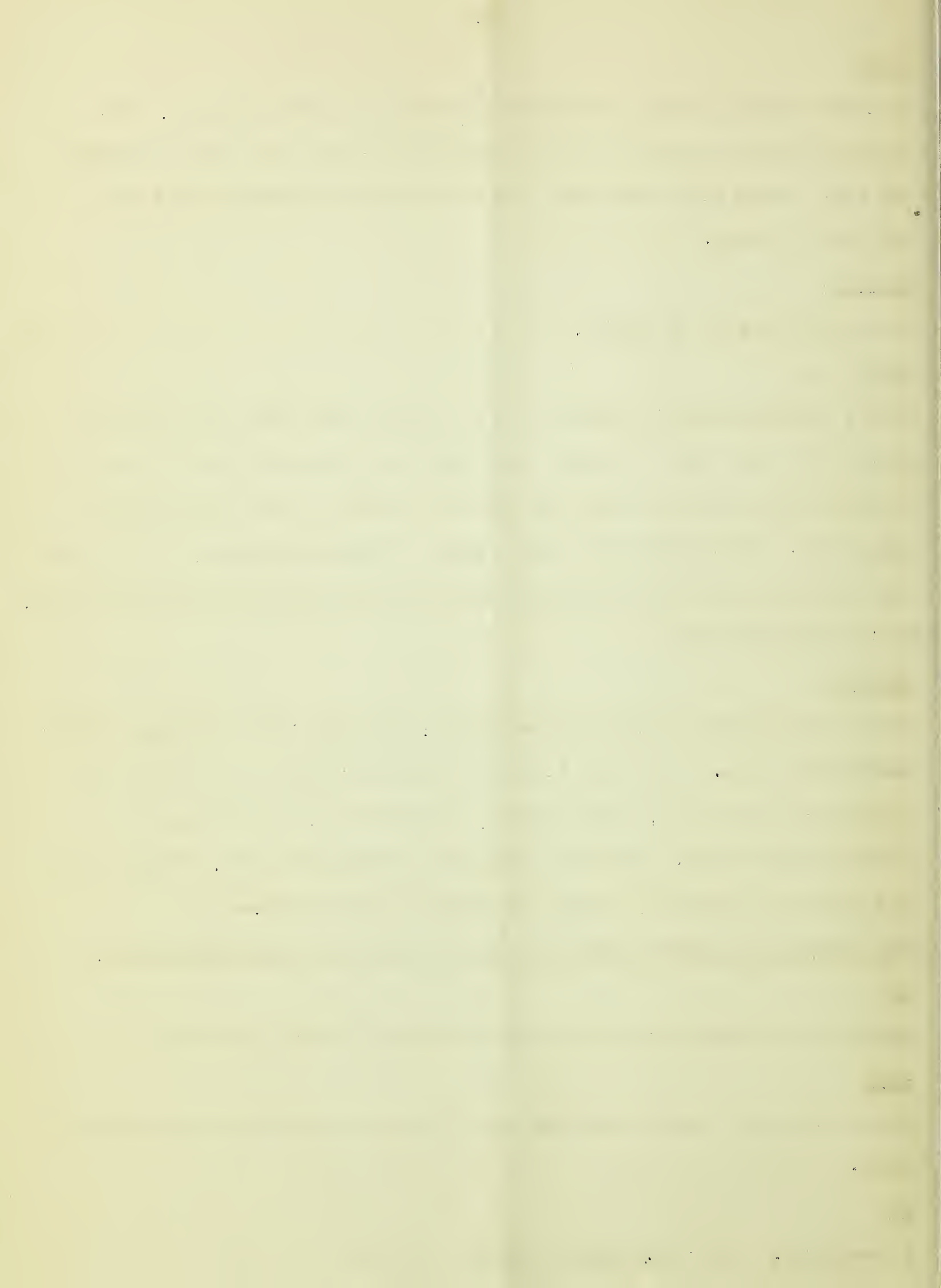
Looks sorta familiar around the warehouse, don't it, Roe?

LEER

Sure does, Hy. Don't seem so many years since I was a roustabout here.

HY

I remember. You were just a little feller.



LEER

And gettin' 25 cents a day.

HY (laughing)

And now you're a big tobacco grower yourself. But seriously, Roe, have you sold all your tobacco?

LEER

All that's on the floor. I didn't have very much this year, about 600 pounds to the acre. By George, we had 18 acres of tobacco and didn't have the barn full.

HY

That isn't very good. How'd the prices go?

LEER

Not so good, either. You know, quality goes with quantity in burley tobacco, ordinarily speaking.

HY

I'm surprised, though, that you got that much, from the looks of your farm.

LEER

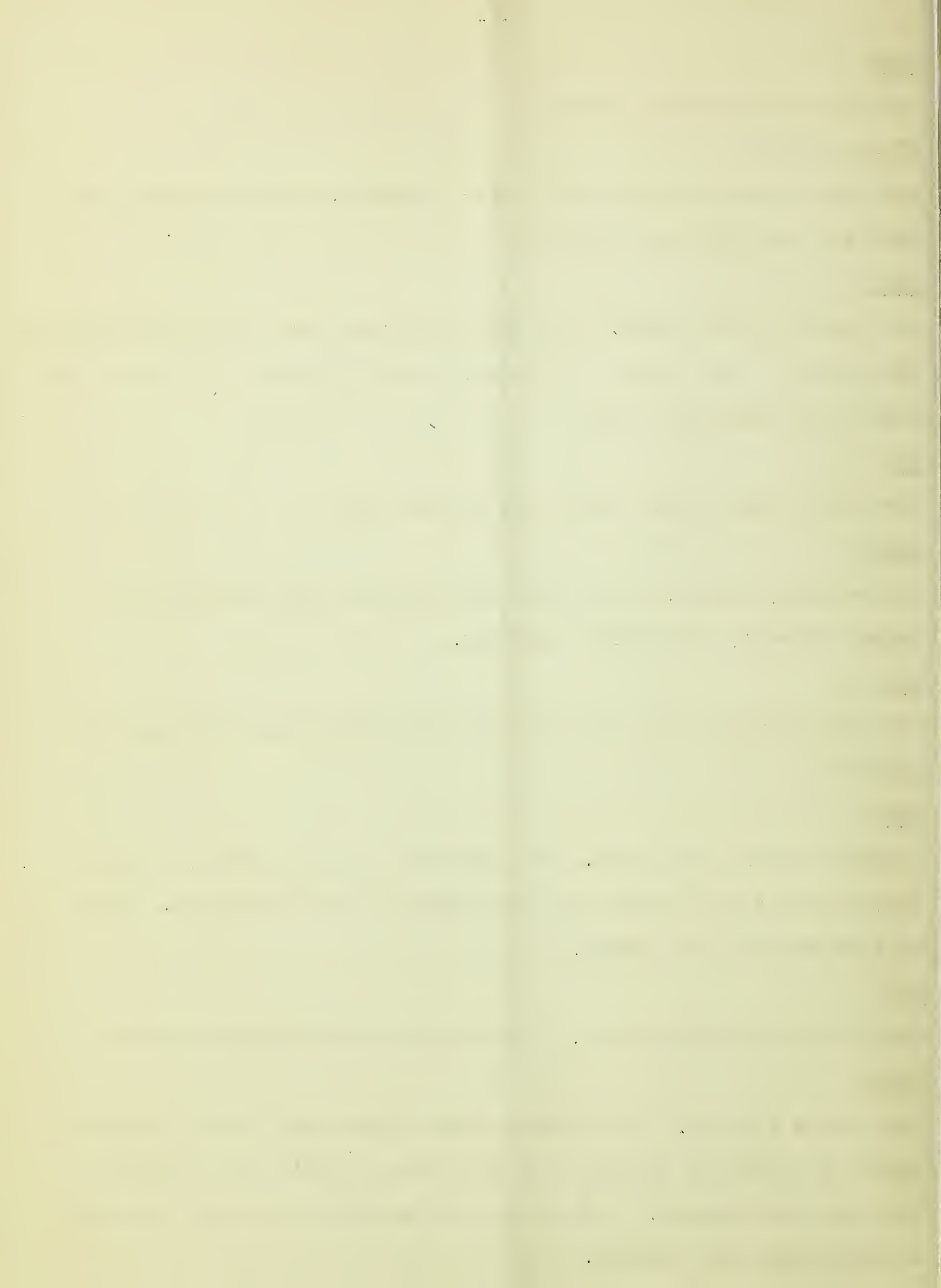
I didn't expect very much. The land was so poor that my tenant wanted to use one of the neighbor farms to set the bed in. Said my farm wasn't good enough.

HY

But you are building it up. I can tell the difference already.

LEER

But it's a big job. I'll swear, those folks that rented it out before I bought it sure skinned the land. Didn't grow anything but corn and tobacco. I like lots of grass and clovers, and just a little corn and tobacco.



HY

Tobacco'll take the starch out of it, all right. Most of my land is in grass and meadow.

LEER

And it's in good shape. Funny thing, some of my best land is the steepest land, because it was cleared up last by the tenants. My best land is the steepest, but it won't be good if I try to crop it very long. You can't keep cropping steep land, and get away with it.

ORGAN: SMOKE DREAMS.

ALLISON

You can't keep cropping steep land, and get away with it. But the forests have been slashed and burned, and the plowshare has bitten deep, deep into the soil, and the soil has melted with the rain. But Roe Leer worked, worked, worked, fought to build up the soil...

SOUND: Occasional bleat of lamb and baa of sheep thru following...

LEER

Here, give me a hand, Virgil. There!

VIRGIL

That makes three in the last hour. Funny how sheep always seem to lamb the most in cold weather.

LEER

They'll be all right here in the barn.

VIRGIL

Looks like you're going to have quite a few lambs this spring, Roe.

LEER

A few more than last year, maybe. We've got a diversified farm... a little of everything. Course, tobacco's still the money crop, just like everybody else.





VIRGIL

Your tobacco sure ought to be better this year, now that you've got it in strips with the meadow.

LEER

That strip farmin' is one of the best things I ever saw. And you know, I didn't think much of it, either.

VIRGIL

Neither did I. To tell the truth, I wanted to leave the farm, just because of them strips. But once you try it, you like it.

LEER

Strip cropping has stopped erosion in the tobacco, that's a cinch. I'm glad Clark Leer told me about it.

VIRGIL

Oh, is that where you found out about it?

LEER

I guess so. He had signed up an agreement with the CCC camp over at Carlisle, but even if he hadn't have told me about it, I'd have run on to it somehow. There's an old saying, "Root, hog, or die!" And that applies to a man as well as a hog. If we don't get our roots in the ground, none of us will last very long. This is my land. I'm going to keep it, so it will keep me.

ORGAN: SMOKE DREAMS.

ALLISON

Nature builds the soil, in her slow, plodding way; shelters it with a protective cover. But if you take off the cover, rip off trees or sod, pulverize the soil with steel implements, push it too hard, deprive it of the humus which helps hold the top of a field together, you upset Nature's balance. Then you hear the cry, "Root, Hog, and Die!" Man is the steward of this film of life. This is our land.





ORGAN: SMOKE DREAMS.

ALLISON

And now, here is Ewing Jones, of the Dayton, Ohio, regional office of the Soil Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture.

JONES

Thank you, Paul Allison. Before we introduce our guests for the evening, and we have several, let me say a word about tobacco. When it was first developed in the coastal South, it aroused a fad. Then it found a market overseas, and proved a godsend to the struggling colonists.

ALLISON

A mixed godsend, I'd say, Ewing: Isn't it hard on the soil?

JONES

Very much so. I've heard that a lot of the Virginia and Maryland colonists who planted tobacco on their clearings did so with misgivings. But if there is a demanding market for tobacco, and your region becomes a tobacco region, you grow it.

ALLISON

And they really grow burley tobacco in Bourbon County, Kentucky.

JONES

And they're proud of it, and rightly so, because it's a fine quality burley. The noticeable feature about it is that Bourbon County farmers are learning better how to take care of their land, so that they can keep growing tobacco, along with their many other crops. One reason they're so progressive is because they have a progressive county agricultural agent, who certainly has an enviable record. He is P. R. Watlington, and everybody calls him Phil, so I'll do the same. Phil, will you join us in this discussion about tobacco farming and soil conservation?



WATLINGTON

All right, Ewing. Just what do you want me to do?

JONES

I thought you might tell us a little more about tobacco raising.

WATLINGTON

That's a big order, and I don't think we can go into all of it. I might point out that white burley, such as we grow in Bourbon County, is distinctly a rich-land tobacco.

JONES

Then any attempts to raise it on poor soils are bound to give disappointing results.

WATLINGTON

Unless manure or fertilizers, or both, are used liberally. It would be far better to precede a burley crop with at least five years of grass and clover. The soil must be well supplied with plant food. And good drainage of both surface and subsoil is especially necessary for the production of good burley tobacco.

JONES

I've heard that one reason the bluegrass soils of Kentucky produce such good tobacco is that the subsoil is porous, and the surplus water drains away quickly.

WATLINGTON

Sometimes too quickly. It not only drains away, but it washes away, taking the soil with it. Fortunately, farmers like Roe Leer have found that out, and they're doing something about it.

JONES

All right, let's find out what that something is. And since you've mentioned Mr. Leer's name, let's get some first-hand information from him. Mr. Leer, we're mighty glad to have you here in person with us.





LEER

Well, I'm glad, too, Ewing, but I don't know that I have anything much to say.

JONES

Just say what you told me about strip cropping the other day.

LEER

I could say a lot about strip cropping. There's no question about it, I think strip farming is one of the best soil conservation measures I ever saw. I don't know what Phil Watlington thinks about it, but I think it's the one type of erosion control that Bourbon County needs most.

WATLINGTON

I'll add to that, Roe: I think most of Kentucky certainly needs it.

JONES

Your first strips were laid out by the camp at Carlisle, weren't they?

LEER

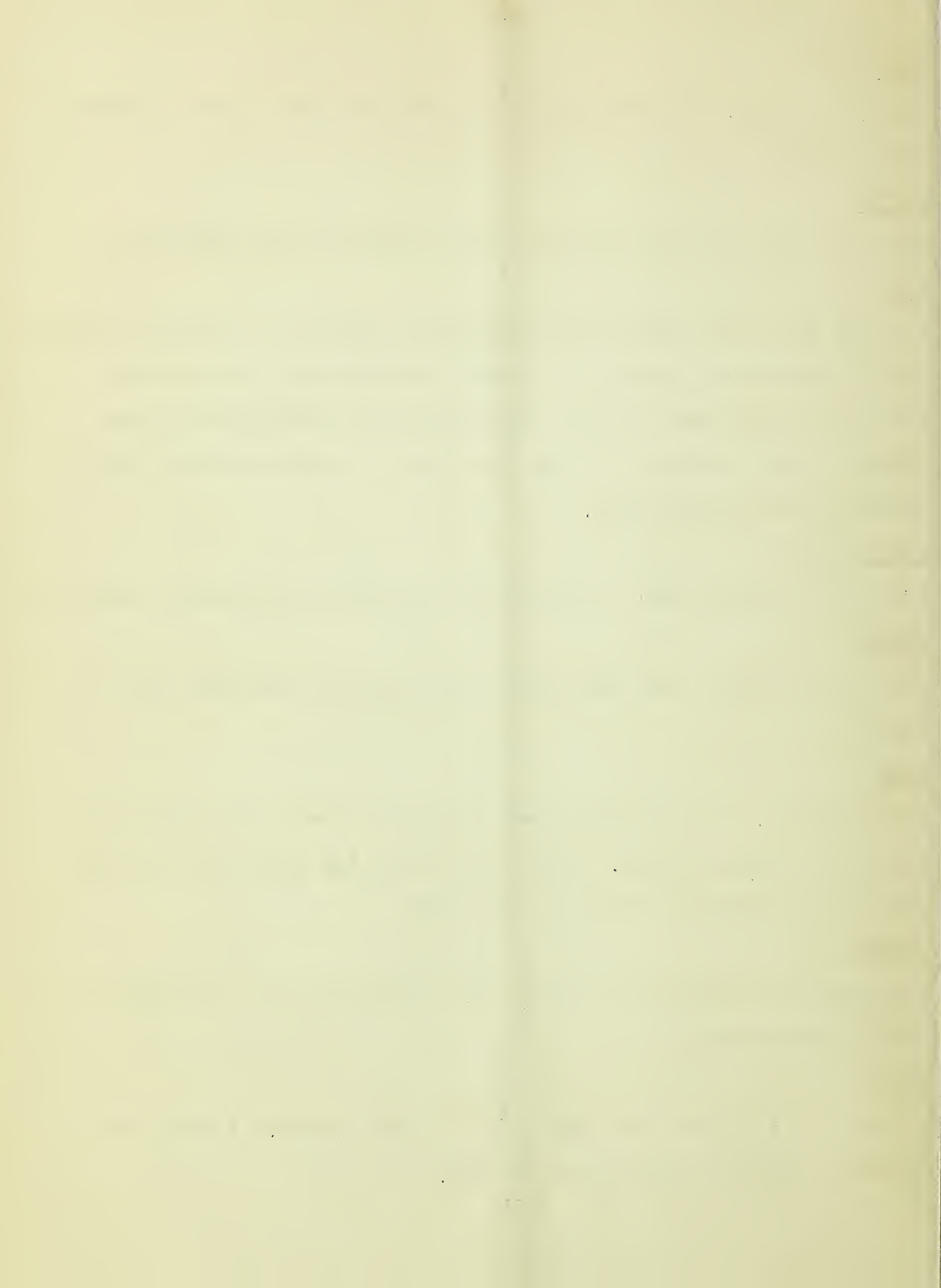
Not entirely. I laid out my own strips at first, and there's no washing on them, either. Since that time, the camp has laid out some more, and done a lot of other work.

JONES

One thing is certain, Mr. Leer, you've become a real believer in soil conservation.

LEER

I had to. I didn't have any choice in the matter. It was sink or swim, and I'd rather swim any day.





WATLINGTON

You have one practice, Roe, that I think deserves mention. You never plow a piece of land more than one year during the rotation.

LEER

I've found out from experience that it doesn't pay. I try to keep my land under some kind of cover as much as possible. And another thing, you ought to see my gully-control dams.

JONES

Are they working?

LEER

I'll say they're working. I was over the other day, looking at those dams. They sure have put a stop to some old gullies that used to give me a lot of trouble.

WATLINGTON

Here's something else, Ewing. Roe has passed his soil conservation ideas on to his son, Roe Junior, who has twice been county 4-H club tobacco champion.

LEER

He's picked up a lot of them himself, Phil. He finishes at M.M.I. at Millersburg this year.

WATLINGTON

Can he play football!

LEER

Yes, but he's most interested in his 4-H club work. And this last year, with his own tobacco, he topped the market!

JONES

I don't blame you for being proud of him, then. How was your own tobacco? I remember that you grew 600 pounds to the acre your first year.



LEER

I got 1,200 pounds to the acre last year, from nine acres. And it was average market value. But I won't be satisfied until I build up my farm so that I'll top the market.

JONES

If you keep on, I'm sure you will. And thanks a lot for coming up here, Phil Watlington, county agricultural agent of Bourbon County, Kentucky, and J. M. Leer, soil-conserving burley tobacco grower. Now, Paul Allison, will you help me a moment?

ALLISON

All right. Do you want a fourth for bridge?

JONES

I'm putting my hands behind me. Now, guess what I'm holding in my right hand.

ALLISON

I can't imagine. No, it couldn't be a bulletin?

JONES

Right one hundred percent! It's a bulletin called, "Strip Cropping for Soil Conservation." It tells how to lay out strips, how they work, with pictures to illustrate it.

ALLISON

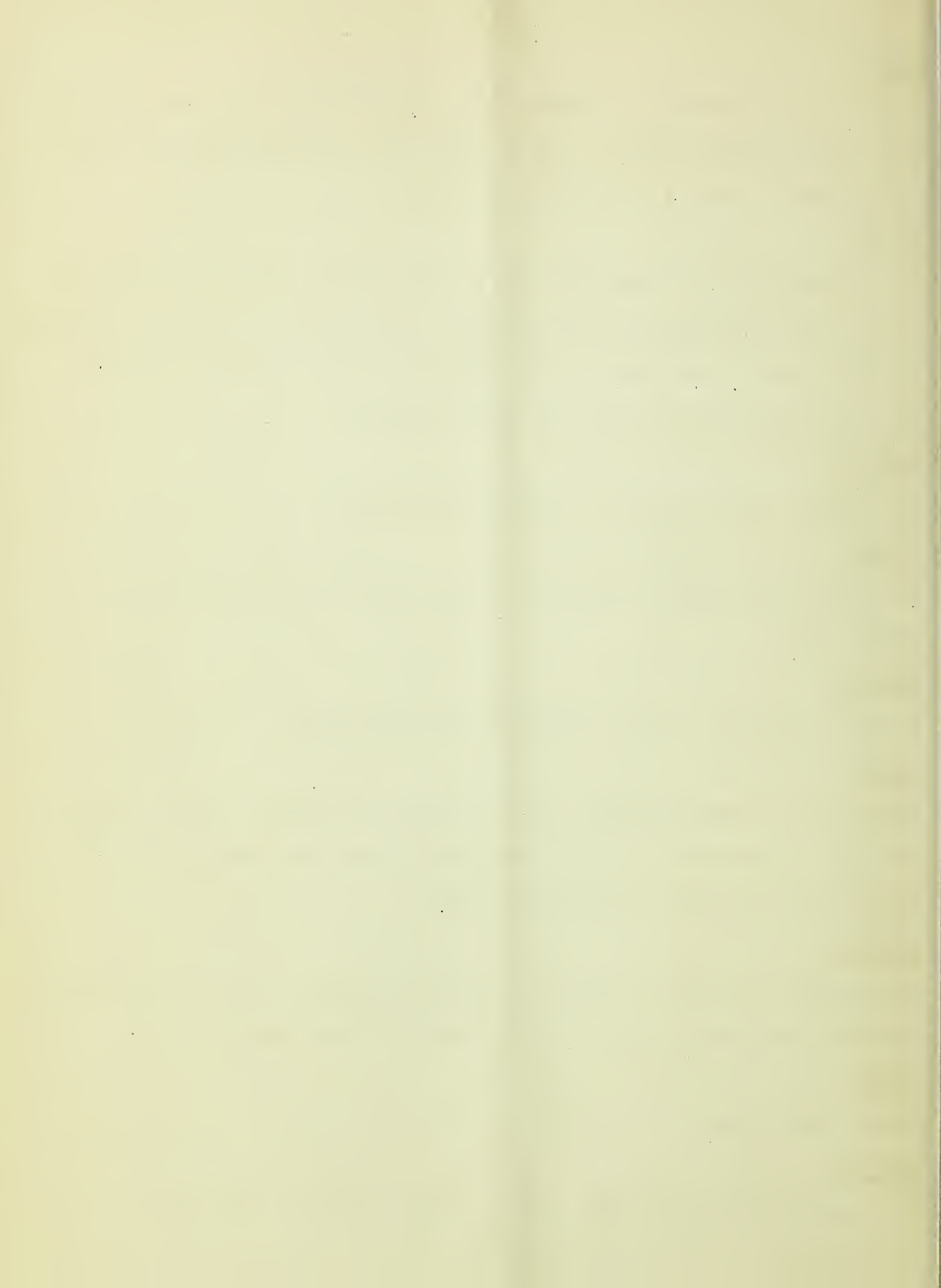
That means that I'm to say, if you would like a copy of the bulletin on strip cropping, write to Soil Conservation, Dayton, Ohio.

JONES

Thank you, Paul.

ALLISON

But wait a minute! What's that you have in your left hand?



JONES

That? Oh, that. That's a bulletin entitled "Anchoring Farmlands." It, too, may be secured by writing to Soil Conservation, Dayton, Ohio. You see, Paul, there are lots and lots of men like Roe Leer who want to find out more about proven methods to conserve the soil and moisture. That's the purpose of these bulletins--to tell them what they can do on their own initiative to save their land--our land.

SOUND: Thunder, followed by rain...

ALLISON

Fortunes Washed Away is a studio presentation of the agriculture department of the Nation's Station.

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